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## Chapter 6

### Doing Sports Chaplaincy in a Fatherless Age

*Nick J. Watson*

Sport chaplains ... should simply maintain a strong, steady, and resolute presence.

Maranise (2014: 5)

#### **Introduction**

Sport chaplaincy in the western world is practiced in a socio-cultural context that is often characterised by wide-spread family breakdown and dysfunction. Social scientists and Christian commentators have described the era following the Second World War (1939-1945) as a ‘fatherless generation’, in which moral and social ills have exponentially increased due to the absence of good father-figures (Sowers, 2010; Blankenhorn, 1995). Of course, fatherlessness is not the only determinant that leads to social and moral problems. Empirical research has shown that unemployment, poverty, a lack of education, drug and alcohol abuse, amongst many other variables, all play their part (The White House, 2012; The Centre for Social Justice, 2011). Nonetheless, the human and financial impact of fatherlessness on societies in the west (and globally) is aptly demonstrated by the fact that both UK and US governments have instigated aggressive and costly strategies to combat the deleterious effects of this problem

(sometimes utilising sports). The pervasive message of Blankenhorn's (1995) seminal text, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* has eventually caught the attention of policy makers in Washington. The US President, Barak Obama, himself having experienced father absence as a boy (Obama, 2004, cited in Stibbe, 2010: 19), in a Father's Day sermon to an African American community in Chicago, reflects on the terrible price of fatherlessness in American society:

If we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that what too many fathers are is missing – missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it ... We know the statistics – that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of school and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioural problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.

Millions of those people participating in sport (from grass roots to professional level), have experienced fatherlessness in some way, that is, they have a 'deficit of love and affirmation' due to a 'physically' or 'emotionally' absent father. Therefore, whether they are conscious of the fact or not (these emotional and spiritual wounds are often buried in the unconscious), arguably they would benefit from the 'soul care', or 'fathering' of a significant other. Chaplains who work in sport offer this service, and herein lies the rationale for providing an analysis of the wider socio-cultural and spiritual context in which sport chaplaincy occurs.

Since the birth of official sport chaplaincy in the 1970s, and particularly in the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the development of national organisations, media attention (Rudd, 2013), practitioner books (Heskins and Baker,

2006; Lipe, 2006) and academic-practitioners calling for the professionalization and accreditation of the field (Watson and Parker, 2014; Dzikus, Waller and Hardin, 2010; Null, 2008). I contend that these developments are, at least in part, a response to the increased need for ‘soul-care’ (fathering) in sporting locales. This is especially pertinent for professional sportspersons due to the many pressures, expectations and demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century elite sport. An extensive body of interdisciplinary research has shown that suicide / suicidal ideation, varying levels of depression and maladaptive anxiety, and the subsequent relational and professional difficulties that follow, are frequently reported by professional athletes (Watson, 2011). Following the institutional professionalization and commodification of sport in the 1960s, more and more athletes it seems are in need of, and are drawing on, the services of sports chaplains, sport psychologists and ‘emotionally intelligent’ coaches and managers (Gamble et al, 2012; Egli and Fisher this volume; Nesti this volume).

This exploratory chapter examines the socio-cultural and spiritual context in which sports chaplaincy (in professional sport) is practiced, in light of the pandemic of fatherlessness in modern western culture. The chapter is structured around four thematic sections which were identified in a recent review of literature on sports and Christianity (Watson and Parker, 2014). These comprise: (i) a biblical overview of fatherlessness and fatherhood (ii) fatherlessness in the modern era (iii) social, political and Christian initiatives to combat fatherlessness (in, and through sports), and (iv) the role of sport chaplains in the ‘soul-care’ of the fatherless. In conclusion, I reflect upon the ‘central calling’ of sports chaplains with regard to how they might deal with fatherlessness, as and when it arises as an underlying issue in the course of their everyday work. My first

task is to provide a biblical foundation to examine fatherlessness in the modern era and its relationship with sport chaplaincy.

### **Fatherhood and the fatherless in the Bible: A brief reflection**

The Fatherhood of God is a central doctrine and narrative throughout the biblical canon. While the explicit use of the term ‘Father’ is limited in the old testament, in the New Testament it appears sixty-five times in the synoptic gospels, and over one hundred times in the gospel of John (Stein, 1996). Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, a monumental shift occurs in creator-creature relations, as all humans are now afforded the opportunity to come into an intimate relationship with a Father God. Yet it is worth examining the notion of God as Father (and the fatherless and orphan) in the old testament, not least because the God to whom Jesus prayed and related to (as recorded in John’s gospel), was principally a God shaped by the Jewish Scriptures and traditions.

Undoubtedly, Jesus would have recited the *Shema* on a daily basis within the Jewish community, a prayer in which God was known as Lord, Yahweh (though Jesus would have said Adonai), and it is worth quoting Wright (2007:17) at length, to elaborate this point:

When Jesus thought of God, spoke of God, reflected on the words and will of God, set out to obey God – it was *this* God, Yahweh God, that was in his mind. “God” for Jesus was the named, biographied, character-rich, self-revealed God Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel ... But of course, Jesus also knew this God of his scriptures in the depth of

his self-consciousness as *Abba*, as his own intimate personal father.

Luke tells us that his awareness was developing even in his childhood, and it was sealed in baptism, when he heard the voice of his Father, accompanied by the Holy Spirit, confirming his identity as God's beloved son.

So in the consciousness of Jesus the *scriptural* identity of God as Yahweh and his *personal* intimacy with God as his Father must be blended together.

That Jesus called God his Father was deeply offensive to the Jewish leaders of the day, something that was embedded in Judaic history, theology and tradition. Only fifteen times in the whole of the old testament is God specifically called by the name of Father, for example, when God is labelled as the Father of the Nation of Israel (e.g., Deut. 32:6; Isaiah 63:16; Jer. 3:4,19) and the Father of specific individual bible characters (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; 1Chron. 17:13; Psalms 68:5). On other occasions, for example when the Nation of Israel is described as God's Son (e.g., Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1-4) and the theme of adoption is evident in narratives pertaining to the fatherless, orphans and widows (e.g., Psalm 27; 9-10; 68: 4-6), father imagery is clearly deployed. In short, the fatherless, the orphans and widows (e.g., Deut 10:18, 14:28-20; Psalm 68:5-6; Prov 23:10-11; Isa 1:17; Zec 8:10), experience the father's heart in compassion, care, protection, authority, discipline, love, provision, strength and gentleness in the old testament. Indeed, there is a strong 'covenantal' dimension to the 'father-son' metaphor utilised in the old testament which is something that reflects the 'relational' and 'familial' nature of the way God choose to relate to His people.

The scarcity of explicit or indirect references to Father in the old testament, Stein (1996) suggests, is predominantly due to its frequent usage in ancient Near-Eastern culture, where it was used in Canaanite fertility religions that involved inappropriate sexual content. Given that there is no evidence in pre-Christian Jewish

scholarship of the Jewish community referring to God as *Abba* (Wright, 2007) - an Aramaic term that conveys intimacy and which was used by children addressing their earthly fathers (as Daddy) - Jesus' teaching and testimony on the fatherhood of God, was indeed, radical and revolutionary.

An exegetical or systematic analysis of the Father-son relationship (within a trinitarian framework) is well beyond the scope of this chapter. That said, from John 1:18 onwards, where the importance of Father is introduced into the storyline, the theology of John's gospel cannot solely '... be swallowed up in Christology' (Stibbe, 2006: 1), as has been the case historically in Johannine studies. Perhaps one of the most illustrative passages of John's gospel with regard to the centrality of the Fatherhood of God, is in Chapter 20 (v.17) where, after the resurrection event, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God". Commenting on this passage, Stibbe (2006) makes clear that Jesus' use of the personal pronoun when speaking with Mary, denoting that God was now her / your Father (following the redemptive work of the crucifixion and resurrection), points to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the adoption of humans from a position of orphanhood (John 14: 18) into intimate relationship with *Abba*. This concept is most clearly expressed in Paul's theological narrative that describes our 'adoption as sons' (Romans, 8: 1-17), which is something that confers a remarkable dignity and status on believers in Christ.

These attributes of the Father's heart and character - compassion, love, gentleness, care, protection and guidance - are among those required of the chaplain working in modern-day sports settings. Many theologians, spiritual writers and social



scientists have argued that the modern world (in particular the west) is suffering from a pandemic of fatherlessness. In light of the prophetic words of Malachi 4:5-6 - ‘... I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the and with a curse’- some have even tentatively suggested that this ‘fatherless generation’ may have eschatological significance (Sowers, 2010; Stibbe, 2010; Kendall, 2004). This is rooted in the premise that the prophet’s oracles have double-prophetic meaning, both, foretelling the ministry of John the Baptist in first-century Palestine (Luke 1: 17) and the ‘day of the Lord’ that will be heralded by a modern-day prophet(s) that will result in the consummation of God’s kingdom. While it is important to carefully weigh such ideas (Matt. 24: 36-44; see also Canfield, 2014) and to be aware that fatherlessness has characterised other imperial societies through history (Hübner and Ratzan, 2011), it is worthy of note, as I now turn to analyse fatherlessness in the modern era. To what extent, we may ask, are many western nations living under the self-imposed ‘curse’ of fatherlessness that the prophet Malachi spoke of?

### **Fatherlessness in the modern era**

Social scientist, David Blankenhorn (1995: 1), communicates the frightening scale and impact of fatherlessness in the US (which has the third highest divorce rate in the world) in stating that:

... fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women.

Fatherlessness and its many deleterious effects, is, of course, not confined to the US, with many academic researchers, social commentators and Christian leaders identifying it as a 'global pandemic' (Stibbe, 2010, 1999). The alarming rise in fatherlessness, in particular in modern industrialised societies, is also mirrored in the world Church with a significant drop in male church attendance across the denominations during the last two decades. Taylor (2014:2) has recently argued that '... the crisis in religious practice in the western world is intimately related to the crisis in fatherhood, since it is from God, as St. Paul tells us, that all paternity on this earth is named (Ephesians 3:15)'. Taylor goes on to call for a more adequate theology of maleness and of fatherhood to help counter fatherlessness in the modern era. This is something that has more recently been addressed by theologians, psychologists and sports scholars (e.g., Aune, 2010; Vitz, 1999; Watson, 2013), and during the last two decades, through the birth of numerous Christian ministries with a focus on the Fatherhood of God. In turn, a flood of popular books have appeared on this topic, from both protestant (Piper and Grudem, 2012; Eldredge, 2009, 2001; Dalbey, 2003) and Catholic commentators (Rohr, 2012).

The reasons for a child / family becoming fatherless, or experiencing fatherlessness (even where a father is physically present), are numerous and complex. Examples include the death of a father; the physically absent father (from divorce or parental relationship breakdown); the achievement-driven father; the abusive father; and the abdicating / apathetic father. The emotional and spiritual wounds that result from fatherlessness are deep, enduring and affect males and females very differently, but are no less devastating (Sowers, 2010). Longitudinal research conducted over the last two decades illustrates the worrying statistics and the societal impact of fatherlessness in the

modern-world (The White House, 2012; Sowers, 2010). Children who are fatherless in the US are (Stibbe, 2010: 20):

- 8 times more likely to go to prison
- 5 times more likely to commit suicide
- 20 times more likely to have behavioural problems
- 20 times more likely to become rapists
- 32 times more likely to run away
- 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances
- 9 times more likely to drop out of high school
- 33 times more likely to be seriously abused
- 73 times more likely to be fatally abused
- One-tenth as likely to get As in school
- On average have a 44% higher mortality rate
- On average have a 72% lower standard of living

These US-based statistics in many ways reflect the situation across the globe, for example, in Britain and Western Europe, Australia, Africa and South America (e.g., Fatherhood Institute, 2013). Some scholars have, however, raised concerns about the flawed methodological design of some of these studies and the validity of their statistical outcomes (especially when cited by particular political and / or religious groups that may wish to promote a specific agenda). For example, in a commissioned report that examined fatherhood and fatherlessness in Australia, Flood (2003) raises a host of questions with regard to research design, the apparent confusion between correlation and causation and the selective use of resulting evidence, which, he suggests, often manifests itself in simplistic claims with regard to the relationship

between fatherlessness and social problems. More broadly speaking, commentators from the media, academia and political realms all consistently acknowledge that fatherlessness is a weighty social issue that leads to multiple social, financial, emotional and political problems (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012). This has led to an exponential increase in the number of studies surrounding ‘men’ and ‘family’ issues (principally emanating from social science and social policy disciplines including those concerning the sub-culture of sports; see, for example, the work of Messner and Sabo (1990), which, in itself, is grounded in the rise (in the late 1980s and early 1990s) of the academic field of Men’s Studies (Kimmel, Heran and Connell, 2004). Nonetheless, it was not until recently that the first major study of fathering in the context of sport and leisure was published.

Picking up on this wave of critical enquiry into the relationship between maleness and sport, Kay, the editor of *Fathering through Sport and Leisure* (2009: 1), states that: ‘... sport and leisure researchers ... appear to be riding on a tide of interest in fathers and fatherhood. With so much mounting evidence that fathers place leisure at the heart of their parenting’. But the circumstances surrounding post-modern models of fatherhood are ‘complex and contradictory’ and thus ‘it is increasingly unclear what the role of a father is, and perhaps even less clear, what it ‘should’ be’ (Kay, 2009: 7). While Kay’s social-scientific text is a welcome and timely addition to the literature, its limitation from a Christian stance is its lack of a foundational theology of fatherhood; a relatively clear and objective model of what a father should be. As Stibbe (2010:25), a new testament scholar and church minister, states, when writing on the issue of fatherlessness, ‘... nothing is going to change [significantly] until we understand that this is a spiritual issue’. I agree, and after identifying the scale and significance of the

problem of fatherlessness in western industrialised society I now turn my attention to recent political and Christian initiatives which seek to combat fatherlessness.

### **Social, political and Christian initiatives to combat fatherlessness**

In response to the scourge of fatherlessness in modern societies, over the last two decades a wide-range of political, charitable and Church-based initiatives have emerged with the aim of combating the problem of absent fathers, through research, lobbying, intervention programmes and legislative amendment. In the UK, *The Fatherhood Institute* (1999-), *The Centre for Social Justice* (2004-), *The Marriage Foundation* (2013-) and those with a Judea-Christian foundation, *The Relationships Foundation* (1994-), and the *XLP Mentoring* (1996-) organisation are examples of these. There is also a rapidly developing Church-based movement emerging in the UK and US that seeks to combat fatherlessness through the intentional adopting and fostering of children (Bergeron, 2011; Kandiah, 2013). Collectively, these organisations address family breakdown and dysfunction (and thus, fatherlessness) in a variety of ways, not least, due to the £44 billion cost to the British taxpayer (Benson, 2014), which is reflected in the UK government's strategic launch of the *Childhood and Family Task Force* (2011).

In the US there is a similar *National Fatherhood Initiative* (1994-) and *The Mentoring Project* (2006-), whose President, Dr John Sowers, has written an important book on the theology of fatherlessness that is based on his doctoral thesis (Sowers, 2010) and which includes a number of examples of mentoring in and through sports settings. Sowers, is also a 'Champion of Change' in President Obama's *Responsible*

*Fatherhood Working Group* (The White House, 2012), something that led to the launch of *The President's Fatherhood Pledge*. Within the microcosm of sport there are also, encouragingly, a number of practical initiatives with a Christian underpinning that have a specific vision to address father absence and to bring life, hope and God's love to children. Of course, the utilisation of 'mentoring' in sport through coaching and teaching (regardless of affiliation, or not, to a religious group), is a well-documented method via which to inculcate desirable character attributes and to promote healthy civil engagement, in particular, with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Gravelling, Collins & Parker, 2014; Meek, 2013; Crabbe, 2009; McCloskey & Bailes, 2005). But my focus here is on the response of the Christian community (individuals and organisations alike) to the problem of fatherless, and how sport can act as vehicle for mentoring / fathering.

Perhaps the most well-known and largest sports organisation to actively seek to rejuvenate 'godly manhood' and to encourage fathering from a Christian world-view - which is based in the US but has a global reach - is *The Promise Keepers* (1990-). The former NFL player and college football coach Bill McCartney founded this organisation and (perhaps somewhat predictably on account of its conservative evangelical position on biblical notions of manhood) has attracted critiques from secular and feminist sociologists (e.g., Claussen, 2000) and Catholic commentators (Rohr, 2012). Another organisation that is arguably much less evangelical in its approach and which was also founded by an ex-NFL player and Christian minister, Joe Ehrmann, is *Coach for America* (a division of *Building Men and Women for Others Inc.*). This ministry organisation gained national recognition in the US following the publication of Ehrmann's Pulitzer prize-winning book, *Season of Life: A Football Star, a Boy, a*

*Journey to Manhood* (Marx, 2003; also see Ehrmann, 2011). While far more ‘pastoral’ than overtly evangelical, the pedagogical philosophy of John Wooden, the renowned US basketball coach (and devout Christian), was also imbued with a strong ‘fathering element’ (see Williams & Denney, 2011). Tony Dungy, a former Super-Bowl winning coach, who has worked extensively with the *Fellowship for Christian Athletes* (1952-, a US-based sports ministry organisation) and who is a national advocate for many US-based fatherhood initiatives, has written a number of books addressing fatherlessness and the importance of mentoring and relational skills through sports coaching (Dungy, 2010).

While there are significantly less Christian-based initiatives in the UK that have used sport to combat fatherlessness, encouragingly the sports ministry organisation *Ambassadors Football* (1993-), recently organised a ‘father’s football project’ in the inner-city London borough of Tower Hamlets with a view to encouraging fathers to engage more with their children. In South Africa, Cassie Carstens, chaplain to the South-African Rugby World Cup winning team of 1995, has recently started a movement called *The World Needs a Father* (2011-) that utilises sports amongst a host of other social-cultural drivers to educate and convey the love of God.

The practical sport-faith initiatives noted above all provide a sign of light and hope that the problem of fatherlessness can, in part, be met through the vehicle of sport (and fundamentally the Christian gospel expressed through fathering in this context). But what role can individual sports chaplains play in addressing such a widespread and endemic societal problem as fatherlessness?

### **The role of sports chaplains in the ‘soul care’ of the fatherless**

It may seem unrealistic to suggest that chaplains working in sport could have much of a redemptive and corrective impact on this ‘fatherless generation’. Based on the premise that Christians are called to be a ‘faithful presence’ in culture (Hunter, 2010) and to ‘love’ those individuals that God brings across their paths, I argue, however, that sports chaplains play a somewhat understated and yet increasingly vital role in addressing the wounds of the fatherless in sporting environments. Chaplaincy in sport is a ministry calling in which the incarnational testimony of a Christ-like life carries much weight: ‘preach the gospel, and if necessary use words’, as St Francis is reputed to have said. Along these lines, US-based sports chaplain, Roger Lipe (2013), has recently provided a mandate to critically reassess the role of the chaplain in sport, which calls for the resurrection of the concept of ‘shepherding or fathering’, and in turn, a Christo-centric starting-point for reflections on this topic:

The present world of sport and much of sports ministry is characterized by three primary weaknesses. 1) The prevalence of compartmentalized lives; that is a lack of integrity. This is easily seen in situations like the fall of coaches, players, and even prominent Christian athletes. 2) The horrible lie of performance based identity. A player’s sense of personal worth may rise or fall based upon his most recent performance on the field of competition. A coach’s sense of God’s pleasure with her may ride on her team’s win/loss record. Even worse, a sport chaplain’s sense of his or her being in God’s will can be shaped by the relative success or failure of the teams being served. Each and all of these scenarios are emblematic of the terrible lie that assaults the hearts of sports people. 3) The collapse of the American family structure. Most of the young men and women whom we serve are now from single parent families. They start their lives relationally and spiritually handcuffed. Worse still, if they are so blessed as to be athletically gifted, they may find that their coaches, teammates, agents, peers, lovers, even their parents and sport chaplains use the player for their own personal gain.



If many of the sports people that chaplains relate to ‘start their lives relationally and spiritually handcuffed’ due to family breakdown and dysfunction, then clearly the fathering role is immediately brought to the fore in sports chaplaincy practice. While I am sure that chaplains from across the globe have often ‘stood in the gap’ and take on the role of father (and /or mother) in their ministry in sport, this has never been made explicit. However, Cottom and Waller’s (this volume) recent appeal to revive the ‘shepherding’ dimension in pastoral theology, sport chaplaincy training, and thus, the ‘hearts’ and ‘minds’ of individual practitioners, is implicitly tied to the notion of fathering and the central message of this chapter.

In the high-pressure world of modern-day professional sport in which a significant moral vacuum exists (McNamee, 2010), men and women in sports need the love of God the Father mediated to them through those who love and *know* Him. Writing during the 1970s, the era in which the sports chaplaincy movement began to take shape, Henri Nouwen, in his classic pastoral reflection, *The Wounded Healer* (1990/1979), spoke of the need for the alienated, the fatherless, those who have failed, to receive the Father’s ‘presence’ through others, to be listened to, to be gently guided and to be loved. And herein lies the mystery and beauty of servant-hearted chaplaincy to those in sport. A paradoxical role in which, at times, little seems to be ‘achieved’, yet where the Kingdom of God is manifest and the heart of the Father is *revealed to* players (and support staff) who are in a state of crisis or transition, experiencing failure, grief or stress – or who simply need a non-judgmental friend or mentor who they can trust.

## **Conclusion**

Sports chaplains need to be affirmed and encouraged of the importance and timeliness of their vocation in an age of fatherlessness and in a highly competitive sports world in which they are often marginalised, overlooked, undervalued and undercompensated. Your ‘presence’ is the Father’s ‘presence’, you are God’s whisper in a setting often characterised by deep insecurity and the ever-present threat of rejection.

While some are called to be evangelists, prophets and/or teachers in the local church and /or on a national stage, sports chaplains are essentially called to love the ‘one’—the athlete, coach, cleaner, manager, administrator, official, board member. The need for more chaplains that have a ‘pastoral heart’ has recently been documented by Galli (2011: 1) who bemoans church leadership models which overemphasise the need for ‘prophetic and charismatic’ leaders (of course, leaders with these characteristics are also needed). He argues that this approach ‘... inadvertently denigrates every clergyperson who is a ... chaplain - in hospitals, in the military [and sport] ... as if these ministers are second-class clergy’. On the contrary, I agree with the great spiritual writer, Oswald Chambers (1935), who suggests that loving the ‘one’ is the way that the Father will ‘sweep the earth with His saints’. Little Christs revealing the heart of the Father to the broken, lost and hurting in all of our societal institutions (the market place) including the competitive and transient world of professional sport. The recent exponential growth in sports chaplaincy training, accreditation and the development of validated university courses, as documented in this book, is a vital encouragement for the profession. Nevertheless, as Jesus knew intimately Yahweh as his *Abba*, I would argue that *the* most important thing for a sports chaplain in the busy modern era is to take time to fellowship with the Father, for, ‘you can’t give, what you yourself have not received’.

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